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5/19/20 (Item 9 from file: 148)

DIALOG(R)File 148:Gale Group Trade & Industry DB

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07205121 SUPPLIER NUMBER: 15237268 (THIS IS THE FULL TEXT)

Make peace-keeping playful. (using puppets to ease classroom conflicts)

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Instructor (1990), v103, n7, p24(2)

March, 1994

ISSN: 1049-5851

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

RECORD TYPE: FULLTEXT; ABSTRACT

WORD COUNT: 938

LINE COUNT: 00072

ABSTRACT: **Puppets** are useful methods when teaching children how to react to familiar classroom conflicts. Using them as teaching strategies allows children to think about the causes of conflict without feeling defensive or blaming others. Suggestions for the use of **puppets** include the use of distinct characters who go through the same experiences that children do. It is also useful to use characters who have faults but at the same time have good qualities. The **puppets** should be allowed to converse freely in a non-structured, informal setting.

TEXT:How to use **puppets** to ease classroom conflicts

As our society--and our schools--become increasingly violent, educators are recognizing that it's never too early for children to learn to defuse anger, put themselves in one another's shoes, and work at getting along. One effective way to guide primary students toward settling disputes with words is through **puppet** play. But stocking your classroom with **puppets** and hoping your students play out their problems is not enough. We asked Jeff **Peyton** --who helps teachers put **puppets** to work in their classrooms through the Virginia-based **Puppetools** --how to orchestrate **puppet** play to help youngsters acquire lifelong communications skills. Here's Jeff's advice.

WHY PUPPETS ?

Using **puppets** to act out familiar classroom conflicts--disguised as imaginary scenarios your students can relate to--helps young children:

- * distance themselves from immediate classroom disputes;
- * reflect on causes of problems without becoming defensive or casting blame;
- * realize they have choices in reacting to conflict; and
- * find the words to express those choices and explore options.

PREPPING FOR PUPPET PLAY

Here are several tips to remember as you plan your **puppet** plays.

Create Distinct Characters

The secret of teaching kids conflict-resolution strategies through **puppetry** is to breathe life into **puppets**, creating characters who face the same dilemmas as students. Once you give **puppets** distinct voices and personalities, you'll have a playful teaching tool for initiating dialogue on any topic, from selfishness to name-calling.

Add "Warts" When creating **puppet** personalities, you may be tempted to bring to life good-as-gold role models, but the characters kids get the most out of are not unrealistic goody-two-shoes types. Instead, they are characters who make mistakes, act out, and have flaws, as well as good qualities. So you might acquaint your class with Brad the Bullfrog, who is always getting into trouble for fighting on the playground but who is a sorry underneath, or Tommy Turtle, who is affectionate but finds it difficult to keep friends because he's always tattling to the teacher.

Opt for the Informal Handheld **puppets** are most effective for classroom problem-solving sessions, and you don't need a stage for them, either. In fact, stages can create artificial barriers that put a distance between the **puppets** and the children. Also, **puppets** should converse freely, because scripts can be stilted and don't allow you latitude to

improvise as your class reacts to what the **puppets** are saying.

FOUR STEPS TO RESOLVING CONFLICT WITH **PUPPET** PLAY

Once you've created characters, here's how to put them to work in your classroom.

1. Define the dispute you want to resolve and then pretend a **puppet** is experiencing a similar problem.

If some students in your class constantly name-call, despite your reminders to treat others with respect, bring up the issue by creating a **puppet** such as Polly Parrot, who loves to tease others but doesn't have any friends, and have her visit your class. So that students can take an objective look at the situation, Polly Parrot should drop by from time to time to complain about an experience that's similar to a classroom scenario.

When Polly Parrot visits, ask students to listen as she describes her feelings, then initiate discussion about the situation by saying something like: "It sounds like Polly teases a lot, but she also feels sad because she has no friends. How can we help her make friends?"

2. Have children think about the "why" behind the **puppet**'s problem and then brainstorm possible solutions.

Ask children to talk about why they think Polly Parrot might call other **puppets** names. Then record students' suggested solutions to Polly Parrot's problem on a sheet of chart pad paper. At this stage, any and all suggestions are okay. Once kids have exhausted their ideas, add some of your own. You might suggest some first-aid strategies for healing conflicts, such as putting oneself in the other **puppet**'s shoes. Also, consider asking students to write or illustrate possible solutions.

3. Decide together on a strategy for the **puppet** to try.

Once you've made a list of possible solutions, ask the class to talk about which ones seem better than others, and then settle on a strategy to try, such as awarding Polly Parrot stars for desired behavior. You might ask a caretaking student-friend to take Polly Parrot home for the weekend and help her work through her problem. Then, the following week, ask the **puppet**'s friend to report on the progress he or she and the **puppet** made together.

4. Provide time for ongoing problem-solving follow-ups with the **puppet**.

Children need to see problem-solving as a process. So, after settling on a solution, periodically touch base with the character to see how the class's ideas are working. During these revisits, the **puppet** may describe new complications--perhaps a new baby **puppet** sibling has arrived--or temptations to slip back into old ways. You may need to try more than one solution to resolve the conflict, and this will help kids acquire a repertoire of strategies and communication skills to apply to real-life situations. In the end, your **puppet** should thank your class for helping her learn how to think through her problems and arrive at solutions that really work.

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INDUSTRY CODES/NAMES: BUS Business, General

DESCRIPTORS: Conflict management--Study and teaching; Elementary school teaching--Technique; **Puppet** theater in education--Technique

FILE SEGMENT: MI File 47

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